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AUTHOR Young, Wanda
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ABSTRACT

A case study of the communications of a 79-year-old woman was conducted to test an ecological model of communication. The ecological model is concerned with the conditions to which the aged person adapts by using communication, what that communication entails, and the criteria by which the success of the adaptive communication process may be evaluated. Information on earlier incidents in the subject's life was obtained through questioning and discussion during participant observation. It was found that the subject's communication with her cats was the condition that had kept her active and interested in survival. On the micro or leisure level, the subject's participation with a conversational bridge club, which over the years had diminished and then disbanded because of death and disability, provided an example of the disengagement from social activities that the elderly often experience. On the meso level, family interaction was a form of communication providing continuity in the subject's life. She felt needed and loved by the three generations of her family. The examples of interaction for the activity, disengagement, and continuity theories of aging may be applied to some level of the ecological model: pets served as significant others, the bridge club as an organization mechanism, and the interaction with grandchildren as a communication process contributing to survival. (HOD)

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# An Ecological Approach to Theories of Aging

Wanda Young
College of Home Economics
University of Saskatchewan
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan
Canada S7N 0W0

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An Ecological Approach to Theories of Aging

Among Kurt Lewin's ( 1951 ) contributions were the field theory and notions about life space. The latter was explained by Evered ( 1977) as the interaction between the person and his environment, which Lewin presented in the formula: B = F ( P, E ). Population and environment were important components of ecological theories. The purpose of this paper was to integrate the theories of aging: activity, disengagement, and continuity with ecological theories to develop a model which was tested in a case study of the communications of a 79 year old woman.

## Review of Literature

To develop and test the model, theories of aging: activity, disengagement, and continuity were read. Some ecological theories were reviewed. The literature of communication and aging was of concern.

### Activity Theory of Aging

Havighurst, Neugarten, and Tobin ( 1968) indicated that the activity theory of aging described active older persons who maintained their middle age patterns of interaction, socially and psychologically. The persons were positive, vigorous, and regarded life as meaningful and pleasurable. Friends, particularly those of their own age were cultivated. New interests were developed and the individual continued useful pursuits.

### Disengagement Theory of Aging

As a result of a study conducted in Kansas, Cumming and Henry ( 1961) posited the disengagement theory of aging. Disengagement

was considered to be an inevitable process in which many of the relationships of an elderly person were gradually severed and other relationships were changed in quality. It was postulated that elderly persons had a universal acceptance of death, changes in ego energy and skill, a loss of morale, and a loss of role in the culture. There were differences between men and women.

Continuity Theory of Aging

Townsend ( 1968) explained the differences between men and women in that men experienced discontinuity as they left work. Women continued the role of helper in the home which they had always experienced. The continuity experienced by women is felt by both sexes who age in Israel. Talmon ( 1968) described the continuity of the Israeli collective, which depended upon inter generational continuity. Clark ( 1967) deplored the cultural discontinuity evident in the North American culture where retirement is prescribed, suggesting that values be reordered. Cowgill and Holmes ( 1972) found continuity a role of the aged in Africa through the leadership, honor, and responsibility afforded them. Kuypers ( 1972) pointed out the importance of studying a persons total life and lifestyle to determine continuity and change.

Ecological Theories

Micklin ( 1973) included a model derived by Duncan, to explain survival in human ecological systems. The human population was surrounded by the environment and both were affected by social organizations, which Duncan identified as : technological, symbolic, regulatory, and distributional. Micklin ( 1973) recommended certain

questions be asked as humans cope with the environment:

1. What are the conditions to which the collectivity adapts?
2. What does the process of adaptation entail?
3. What organizational mechanisms does the collectivity have at its disposal for achieving adaptation?
4. What are the criteria by which the relative success of the adaptive process may be evaluated? [1]

Bronfenbrenner ( 1977) and his colleagues drew upon Kurt Lewin's theories of ecological substance to conduct experiments in human development. Bronfenbrenner described the environment of children as: the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, and the macrosystem. Ten domains were delineated in the microsystem of children. These described various kinds of activity, such as games, music, work or non activity such as the nonengagement of sleep and waiting and observation of the activity of others. Observations in the mesosystem included interrelations among two or more settings in the child's environment, for example, the transition from home to school. The exosystem related to events that occurred to affect the environment of the child. These events might influence the significant others or the institutions that made decisions to affect the child. Finally, the macrosystem focused on beliefs and lifestyles derived from various social organizations.

Communication and Aging

Auerswold ( 1968) recommended that interdisciplinary studies be made of the communication processes within an ecological system and at the interface between systems.

Bettinghaus and Bettinghaus ( 1976) noted that environmental changes do cause communication problems for the elderly, whether the person moves to a new environment or whether the environment changes around him. All persons, but especially the elderly needed to talk to other persons for reassurance, to maintain stability and prevent despondency, to work out decisions, and to gain information.

In this study human communication was defined according to Oyer and Oyer ( 1976) as " the sending and receiving of messages, both verbal and non-verbal, within, between, and/or among people"[2] and adapted by including significant others, such as pets. Oyer and Oyer pointed out the importance of communication in the lives of older persons. In the summary Oyer ( 1976) noted that the interface of environmental support systems do affect the life of an aging person and that an ecological approach would be a useful framework from which to study aging and communication.

## Development of an Ecological Model to Study Communication and Aging

It was proposed that communication behavior be explained as a function of the interaction of an aging person with the environment at four levels: micro, meso, exo, and macro, as shown in Figure 1 ( Bronfenbrenner 1977).

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insert figure 1 about here

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Questions which might be asked by the researcher studying

communication and aging were adapted from Micklin ( 1973) as:

1. What are the conditions to which the aged person adapts by using communication?
2. What does the process of communication adaptation of the aged person entail?
3. To what organizational mechanisms does the aged person have communication access to achieve adaptation?
4. What are the criteria by which the success of the adaptive communication process may be evaluated?

Table 1 shows the domains and criteria that might be used at each ecological level in the environment to study communication processes that assist adaptation and development of the individual aged person or groups of elderly persons. This table is derived from Bronfenbrenner ( 1977), Micklin ( 1973), and Duncan ( 1967).

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insert table 1 about here

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It was proposed that the aged be observed and/or interviewed about each of the ecological levels using the questions adapted from Micklin ( 1973) to analyze the communication behavior as a function of the activity, disengagement or continuity with the environment.

An Ecological Study of Communication in Em's Lifespace

Notes were made during participant observation of Em, a 79 year old woman. Earlier incidents in Em's life were gathered through questionning and discussion during participant observation. For

this paper one example was chosen to illustrate each of the theories of aging: activity, disengagement, and continuity.

Activity Theory: Conditions in the Exo Level

The exo level included events that affected the subject and significant others, institutions, and decisions in the active life of the subject. The appropriate question for this section was: what are the conditions of the events concerning significant others, to which the aged person adapted by using communication? The significant others were cats and family members: father, husband, and daughter.

Throughout her life, Em actively cared for cats. Em grew up on a farm where most cats were strays dumped by townspeople or barnyard progeny. These cats were caressed in secret in the barn as Em's father was an authoritarian man with a high work ethic.

Em married in her late teens. When her first born, a daughter, had a leg injury that confined her to bed for several months prior to going to school, Em obtained a tiger kitten to while away the convalescent hours. Interaction between mother and daughter was increased by discussion of the kitten's antics.

When the children left home to study, a brown tabby cat was obtained. This cat moved twice with the family and outlived Em's husband. The tabby permitted cuddling which was a solace for Em.

Currently, the unmarried daughter lives with her mother. There are three cats in the home. The cats provide a warning system as Em's hearing has declined as she has aged. The cats are sensitive to the arrival of someone reacting with growls or rushing to the door. They react in the same way to the telephone, drawing Em's

attention when she does not hear a call. The cats are very affectionate and amusing and help Em fill the lonely hours when her daughter is at work. The cats are confidants, who listen, purr, and don't tell secrets. The felines understand the tone of the human voice. Em understands the display of facial expression, the position of the tail and ears, and the body movements of the cats. Visitors come and the cats provide a conversation peice. At 77 years, when two kittens came to the home, Em constructed a gazebo similar in size to her kitchen, which was just one of the physical activities required in cat care.

Communicating with cats has been a condition that has kept Em active and interested . Care, touch, and conversation about these significant others in her environment was evident.

Disengagement: Adaptation at the Micro Level, Leisure Domain

The micro level included leisure as one of the domains shown in Table 1. The following situation related to the leisure domain and answered the question: what does the process of communication adaptation of the aged person entail?

For the past 20 years, Em has lived in the same house. At the time of the move, Em became a member of a group of 10 women who ranged in age from 50 to 65 years. A conversational bridge club met weekly. Ten years later the women decided that meetings every two weeks were sufficient. By the time Em had her 75th birthday the group had dwindled to seven due to death and moves. The bridge club met only once a month picking up an outsider to complete the two tables. Two years ago the group decided not to meet in the

winter months as icy, cold, and windy conditions were a problem. The group now is reduced to five members and has been discontinued. Em misses the conversation about family news and social issues with her friends, but does try to keep in touch with telephone calls. This is an example of disengagement in the leisure domain of the micro level of Em's environment. The disengagement has been forced upon Em and her friends because of death, disability, and environmental conditions.

Continuity: Linkages in the Meso Level

The meso level is the setting that involves linkages and transition between different parts of the social network. How can communication at this level be evaluated to show achievement of continuity?

Intergenerational continuity has been a form of communication for Em. Her two sons live in other provinces. They each have children who come often to visit their grandmother. She has counseled a grandson who became a part of a group that used drugs and later became a single parent. The great grandson comes to be socialized to family traditions. Em is loved and respected by all generations. Values are discussed with her on an individual basis. She receives letters in which joys and sorrows are shared. There are telephone calls when there are special events. Em feels needed by the three generations. This interaction is an example of the meso level of the environment.The criteria are love, respect, being needed and consulted.

## Conclusions

The examples of interaction for the activity, disengagement, and continuity theories of aging have fitted some level of the ecological model. The ecological questions have been answered with reference to pets as significant others, the bridge club as an organization mechanism, and the interaction with grandchildren as a communication process contributing to survival.

Possible future studies which could make use of the ecological questions and the ecological substance model to study communication and aging include: a study of the caretakers in the environment of the aged, conditions in society that lead to disengagement, the communication of pets with aged persons, which channels of communication are evident at each level of the ecological model, and events that stimulate communication for the aged person. The works of Kurt Lewin could be further studied as an integrating force for the theories of aging. Activity and disengagement may be opposing forces that affect continuity or survival of the individual.

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2. Oyer, H. J. & Oyer, E. J. Aging and communication. Baltimore: University Park Press, 1976, p. 2.

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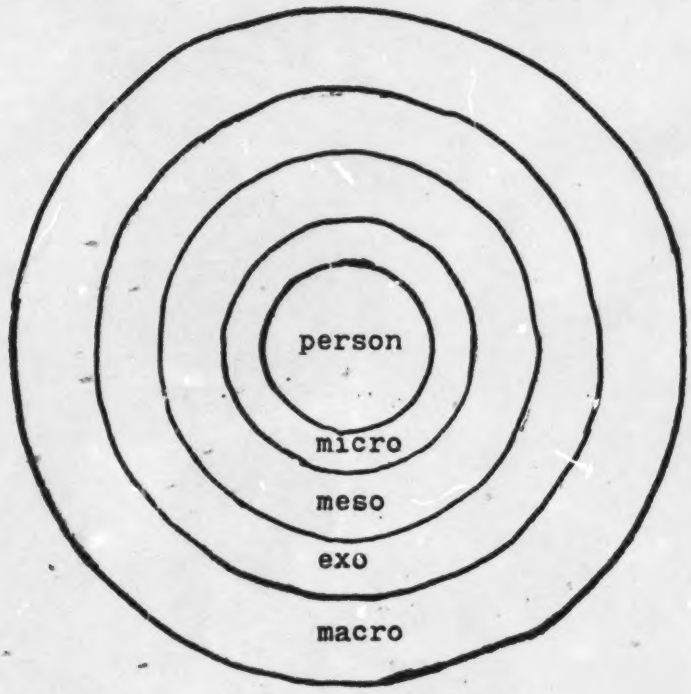
Table 1

Criteria for Ecological Levels

| Level | Criteria | Explanation |
|---|---|---|
| micro | nonengagement | passive, rest, waiting, sleep |
| domains | spectator | watch, tv, radio, people, games |
| | emotional | joy, sorrow, hate, love, anger |
| | leisure | games, crafts, aesthetic |
| | responsibility | for others, financial, legal, volunteer |
| | work | personal care, job, housekeep, shopping |
| | education | classes, read, discussion |
| | social | church, associations, talk |
| meso | transitions | home, church, hospital, |
| settings | | nursing home, death, |
| | links | loss of family, caretaker, media, social network |
| exo | significant others | workplace, residence, pets, |
| events | | garden, town, region |
| | decisions | who makes, consequences |
| | institutions | health system, church, |
| macro | technological | science |
| social | symbolic | ideology, culture |
| organizations | regulatory | power, policy, social control |
| | distributional | mobility of people, resources |

## Figure Caption

Figure 1. Ecological levels to study communication behavior in the environment.


person
micro
meso
exo
macro